Can I Know God’s Will?

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Chapter One

THE MEANING OF GOD’S WILL

Lost in Wonderland, Alice came to a fork in the road. Icy panic stung her as she stood frozen by indecision. She lifted her eyes toward heaven, looking for guidance. Her eyes did not find God, only the Cheshire cat leering at her from his perch in the tree above.

“Which way should I go?” Alice blurted.

“That depends,” said the cat, fixing a sardonic smile on the confused girl.
“On what?” Alice managed to reply.
“It depends on your destination. Where are you going?” the cat asked.
“I don’t know,” Alice stammered.
“Then,” said the cat, his grin spreading wider, “it doesn’t matter which way you go.”

The destination matters to the Christian. We are a pilgrim people. Though we do not wander in a wilderness in route to the Promised Land, we seek a better country, an eternal city whose builder and maker is God. Someday He will take us home to His kingdom.

So the ultimate destination is clear. We are certain that there is a glorious future for the people of God. However, what of tomorrow? We feel anxious about the immediate future, just as unbelievers do. The specifics of our personal futures are unknown to us. Like children we ask: “Will I be happy? Will I be rich? What will happen to me?” We must walk by faith rather than by sight.

As long as there have been people, there have been soothsayers and wizards exploiting our anxieties. If prostitution is the world’s oldest profession, surely fortune-telling is the second oldest. “Tell me of tomorrow” is the plea of the stock market speculator, the competitive businessman,
the sports forecaster, and the young couple in love. The student asks, “Will I graduate?” The manager muses, “Will I be promoted?” The person in the doctor’s waiting room clenches his hands and asks, “Is it cancer or indigestion?” People have examined lizard entrails, snakeskins, the bones of owls, the Ouija board, the daily horoscope, and the predictions of sports handicappers—all to gain a small margin of insurance against an unknown future.

The Christian feels the same curiosity, but frames the question differently. He asks: “What is the will of God for my life?” To search for the will of God can be an exercise in piety or impiety, an act of humble submission or outrageous arrogance—depending on what will of God we seek. To try to look behind the veil at what God has not been pleased to reveal is to tamper with holy things that are out of bounds. John Calvin said that when God “closes his holy mouth,” we should desist from inquiry (Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, trans. and ed. John Owen [reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House. 2003], 354).

On the other hand, God delights to hear the prayers of His people when they individually ask, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” The Christian pursues God, looking for His marching orders, seeking to know what course of action
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is pleasing to Him. This search for the will of God is a holy quest—a pursuit that is to be undertaken with vigor by the godly person.

The Biblical Meaning of the Will of God

We yearn for simple answers to difficult questions. We want clarity. We desire to cut through the entanglements to the heart of the question. Sometimes the answers are simple enough in themselves, but the process of finding them is laborious and confusing. Sometimes the answers are simplistic, giving us temporary relief from the pressures and the burdens of confusing questions.

However, there is a profound difference between the simple answer and the simplistic answer. The simple answer is correct; it accounts for all the data found in the complex problem. It is clear and can be easily grasped in its fullness. It abides, being able to stand the test of rigorous questioning. The simplistic answer is a counterfeit. On the surface it appears to be the genuine article, but under closer scrutiny it yields its bogus flaws. The simplistic answer may account for some of the data but not all of it. It remains fuzzy. Worst of all, it does not abide; it fails the test of deeper questioning. It does not satisfy in the long haul.
One of the most excruciating questions in theology is, “Why did Adam fall?” The simplistic answer, commonly heard, is that Adam fell by his own free will. Such an answer is satisfying until we probe the question more deeply. Suppose we ask: “How could a righteous creature made by a perfect Creator sin? How could Adam make an evil choice while possessing no prior inclination or disposition to evil? Was he simply deceived or coerced by Satan? If so, why would Adam then be blameworthy?” If he was merely deceived, then the fault is all Satan’s. If he was coerced, then it was not a free choice. If he sinned because he had a prior desire or inclination to sin, then we must ask: “What was the source of his evil desire? Did God put it there?” If so, then we cast a shadow on the integrity of the Creator.

Perhaps the simplest way to expose the weak character of the simplistic answer that Adam fell by his own free will is to ask our question another way: “Why did Adam exercise his own free will to sin?” It simply won’t do to answer, “Because he chose to.” This answer is a mere repetition of the question in a declarative form.

I would like to offer a simple answer to the difficult question of Adam’s fall, but I simply can’t. The only response I can give to the question is that I don’t know the answer.

Some readers will surely chasten me at this point by
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saying to themselves: “I know the answer! Adam fell because it was the will of God.”

I immediately ask: “In what sense was Adam’s fall the will of God? Did God force Adam to fall and then punish him for doing what he had no power to avoid?” To ask such an impious question is to answer it. Certainly the fall must have been the “will of God” in some sense, but the crucial question remains, “In what sense?”

So here we are, pressed squarely against a biting question that involves the matter of the will of God. We want to know how the will of God worked in Adam’s life; but more personally, we want to know how the will of God works in our own lives.

When questions are difficult and complex, it is a good rule to collect as much data about them as possible. The more clues the detective has to work with, the easier it usually is to solve the crime (note the word usually). Sometimes the detective suffers from too many clues, which only serve to compound the difficulty of the solution. The corporate executive faced with major decision-making responsibilities knows the importance of sufficient data- and record-keeping. His maxim may be: “If you have enough data, the decisions jump out at you.” Again we must add the qualifier usually. Sometimes the data are so complex that they
jump out like screaming banshees, defying our ability to sort through them all.

I emphasize the point of data, complexity, and simplicity because the biblical meaning of the will of God is a very complicated matter. To approach it simplistically is to invite disaster. At times, wrestling with the complexities of the biblical concept of the will of God can give us an Excedrin headache. Yet ours is a holy quest, a pursuit that is worth a few headaches along the way. But we must guard against proceeding in a simplistic way, lest we change the holy quest into an unholy presumption.

We note at the outset that the Bible speaks of the “will of God” in more than one way. This is the key problem that complicates our quest and serves as a warning against simplistic solutions. In the New Testament, there are two Greek words that can be and have been translated by the English word will. It would seem that all we need is to identify precisely the meanings of the two words and check out the Greek text every time we see the word will, and our problems will be solved. Alas, it doesn’t work that way. The plot thickens when we discover that each of the two Greek words has several nuances of meaning. Simply checking the Greek text for word usage is not enough to solve our difficulty.

However, finding the meanings of the Greek words is a
helpful starting place. Let’s examine the two words briefly to see whether they shed any light on our quest. The words are *boule* and *thelema*.

The term *boule* has its roots in an ancient verb that means a “rational and conscious desire,” as opposed to *thelema*, meaning “an impulsive or unconscious desire.” The ancient subtle distinction was between rational desire and impulsive desire. As the Greek language developed, however, this distinction was softened, and eventually the words became used at times as synonyms, with authors switching from one to the other for purposes of stylistic change.

In the New Testament, *boule* usually refers to a plan based on careful deliberation; it is used most often with respect to the counsel of God. *Boule* frequently indicates God’s providential plan, which is predetermined and inflexible. Luke is fond of using it this way, as we read in the book of Acts: “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan [*boule*] and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23).

Here the resolute decree of God is in view, which no human action can set aside. God’s plan is impregnable; His “will” is unalterable.

The word *thelema* is rich in its diversity of meanings. It refers to what is agreeable, what is desired, what is intended,
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what is chosen, or what is commanded. Here we have the notions of consent, desire, purpose, resolution, and command. The force of the various meanings is determined by the context in which thelema appears.

**The Decretive Will of God**

Theologians describe as the “decretive will of God” that will by which God decrees things to come to pass according to His supreme sovereignty. This is also sometimes called “God’s sovereign efficacious will”; by it, God brings to pass whatsoever He wills. When God sovereignly decrees something in this sense, nothing can prevent it from coming to pass.

When God commanded the light to shine, the darkness had no power to resist the command. The “lights” came on. God did not persuade the light to shine. He did not negotiate with elemental powers to form a universe. He did not achieve a plan of redemption by trial and error; the cross was not a cosmic accident exploited by the Deity. These things were decreed absolutely. Their effects were efficacious (producing the desired result) because their causes were sovereignly decreed.

A serious danger faces those who restrict the meaning of
the will of God to the sovereign will. We hear the Muslim cry, “It is the will of Allah.” We slip at times into a deterministic view of life that says, “Que será, sera,” or “What will be, will be.” In so doing, we embrace a sub-Christian form of fatalism, as if God willed everything that happened in such a way as to eliminate human choices.

Classical theologians insist on the reality of man’s will in acting, choosing, and responding. God works His plan through means, via the real choices of willing and acting creatures. There are secondary as well as primary causes. To deny this is to embrace a kind of determinism that eliminates human freedom and dignity.

Yet there is a God who is sovereign, whose will is greater than ours. His will restricts my will. My will cannot restrict His will. When He decrees something sovereignly, it will come to pass—whether I like it or not, whether I choose it or not. He is sovereign. I am subordinate.

The Preceptive Will of God

When the Bible speaks of the will of God, it does not always mean the decretive will of God. The decretive will of God cannot be broken or disobeyed. It will come to pass. On the other hand, there is a will that can be broken: “the
preceptive will of God.” It can be disobeyed. Indeed, it is broken and disobeyed every day by each one of us.

The preceptive will of God is found in His law. The precepts, statutes, and commandments that He delivers to His people make up the preceptive will. They express and reveal to us what is right and proper for us to do. The preceptive will is God’s rule of righteousness for our lives. By this rule we are governed.

It is the will of God that we not sin. It is the will of God that we have no other gods before Him; that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves; that we refrain from stealing, coveting, and committing adultery. Yet the world is filled with idolatry, hatred, thievery, covetousness, and adultery. The will of God is violated whenever His law is broken.

One of the great tragedies of contemporary Christendom is the preoccupation of so many Christians with the secret decreptive will of God to the exclusion and neglect of the preceptive will. We want to peek behind the veil, to catch a glimpse of our personal future. We seem more concerned with our horoscope than with our obedience, more concerned with what the stars in their courses are doing than with what we are doing.

With respect to God’s sovereign will, we assume we are passive. With respect to His preceptive will, we know that
we are active and therefore responsible and accountable. It is easier to engage in ungodly prying into the secret counsel of God than to apply ourselves to the practice of godliness. We can flee to the safety of the sovereign will and try to pass off our sin to God, laying the burden and responsibility of it on His unchanging will. Such characterizes the spirit of antichrist, the spirit of lawlessness or antinomianism, that despises God’s law and ignores His precepts.

Protestants are particularly vulnerable to this distortion. We seek refuge in our precious doctrine of justification by faith alone, forgetting that the very doctrine is to be a catalyst for the pursuit of righteousness and obedience to the preceptive will of God.

**Biblical Righteousness**

Habakkuk’s famous statement, “the just shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4, KJV), is found three times in the New Testament. It has become a slogan of evangelical Protestantism, whose emphasis has been on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This slogan, containing a hint of the essence of the Christian life, has its focal point in the biblical concept of righteousness.

One of Jesus’ most disturbing comments was the state-
ment, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). It is easy for us to assume that Jesus meant that our righteousness must be of a higher sort than that characterized by men who were hypocrites. The image that we have of scribes and Pharisees from the New Testament period is that of unscrupulous, ruthless practitioners of religious deceit. We must bear in mind, however, that the Pharisees as a group were men historically committed to a very lofty level of righteous living. Yet Jesus tells us that our righteousness must exceed theirs. What did He mean?

When we consider the biblical notion of righteousness, we are dealing with a matter that touches virtually every plane of theology. In the first place, there is the righteousness of God, by which all standards of rightness and wrongness are to be measured. God’s character is the ultimate foundation and model of righteousness. In the Old Testament, righteousness becomes defined in terms of obedience to the commandments delivered by God, who Himself is altogether righteous. Those commands include not only precepts of human behavior with respect to our fellow human beings, but also matters of a liturgical and ceremonial nature.

In Old Testament Israel and among the New Testament
Pharisees, liturgical righteousness was substituted for authentic righteousness. That is to say, men became satisfied with obeying the rituals of the religious community rather than fulfilling the broader implications of the law. For example, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for tithing their mint and cumin while omitting the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy. Jesus indicated that the Pharisees were correct in giving their tithes, but were incorrect in assuming that the liturgical exercises had completed the requirements of the law. Here, liturgical righteousness had become a substitute for true and full obedience.

Within the evangelical world, *righteousness* is a rare word indeed. We speak of morality, spirituality, and piety. Seldom, however, do we speak of righteousness. Yet the goal of our redemption is not piety or spirituality but righteousness. Spirituality in the New Testament sense is a means to the end of righteousness. Being spiritual means that we are exercising the spiritual graces given by God to mold us after the image of His Son. The disciplines of prayer, Bible study, church fellowship, witnessing, and the like are not ends in themselves, but are designed to assist us in living righteously. We are stunted in our growth if we assume that the end of the Christian life is spirituality.

Spiritual concerns are but the beginning of our walk
with God. We must beware of the subtle danger of thinking that spirituality completes the requirements of Christ. To fall into such a trap—the trap of the Pharisees—is to substitute liturgical or ritualistic practices for authentic righteousness. By all means we are to pray and to study the Bible, and to bear witness in evangelism. However, we must never, at any point in our lives, rest from our pursuit of righteousness.

In justification we become righteous in the sight of God by means of the cloak of Christ’s righteousness. However, as soon as we are justified, our lives must give evidence of the personal righteousness that flows out of our justification. It is interesting to me that the whole biblical concept of righteousness is contained in one Greek word, *dikaios*. That same Greek word is used to refer, in the first instance, to the righteousness of God; in the second instance, to what we call justification; and in the third instance, to the righteousness of life. Thus, from beginning to end—from the nature of God to the destiny of man—our human duty remains the same—a call to righteousness.

True righteousness must never be confused with self-righteousness. Since our righteousness proceeds from our justification, which is based on the righteousness of Christ alone, we must never be deluded into thinking that our
works of righteousness have any merit of their own. Yet as Protestants, zealously maintaining our doctrine of justification by faith alone, we must be ever mindful that the justification that is by faith alone is never by a faith that is alone. True faith manifests itself in righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees and the scribes, for it is concerned with the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy.

We are called to bear witness to the righteousness of God in every area of life—from our prayer closets to our courtrooms, from our pews to our marketplaces. The top priority of Jesus is that we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. All other things will be added to that.

An Allergy to Restraint

“Everybody do your own thing.” This cliché from the sixties characterizes the spirit of our age. Increasingly freedom is being equated with the inalienable right to do whatever you please. It carries with it a built-in allergy to laws that restrain, whether they be the laws of God or the laws of men.

This pervasive anti-law, or antinomian, attitude is reminiscent of the biblical epoch that provoked God’s judgment because “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6). The secular world reflects this attitude in the
statement, “Government can’t legislate morality.” Morality is seen as a private matter, outside the domain of the state and even of the church.

A shift has occurred in word meaning so subtle that many have missed it. The original intent of the concept, “You cannot legislate morality,” was to convey the idea that passing a law prohibiting a particular kind of activity would not necessarily eliminate such activity. The point of the phrase was that laws do not *ipso facto* produce obedience to those laws. In fact, on some occasions, the legal prohibition of certain practices has incited only greater violation of established law. The prohibition of alcoholic beverages is an example.

The contemporary interpretation of legislating morality differs from the original intent. Instead of saying that government *cannot* legislate morality, it says government *may not* legislate morality. That means government should stay out of moral issues such as the regulation of abortion, deviant sexual practices, marriage and divorce, and so on, since morality is a matter of conscience in the private sector. For government to legislate in these areas is often viewed as an invasion of privacy by the state, representing a denial of basic freedoms for the individual.

If we take this kind of thinking to its logical conclusion, we leave the government with little to do. If government
may not legislate morality, its activity will be restricted to determining the colors of the state flag, the state flower, and perhaps the state bird. (However, even questions of flowers and birds may be deemed “moral,” as they touch on ecological issues, which are ultimately moral in character.) The vast majority of matters that concern legislation are, in fact, of a decidedly moral character. The regulation of murder, theft, and civil rights is a moral matter. How a person operates his automobile on the highway is a moral issue since it touches on the well-being of fellow travelers.

Questions relating to the legalization of marijuana often focus on the fact that a majority of certain age groups are violating the law. The argument goes like this: Since disobedience is so widespread, doesn’t this indicate that the law is bad? Such a conclusion is a blatant non sequitur. Whether or not marijuana should be decriminalized should not be determined by levels of civil disobedience.

The point is that a vast number of Americans reflect an antinomian spirit regarding marijuana. Such disobedience is hardly motivated by noble aspirations to a higher ethic suppressed by a tyrannical government. Here the law is broken as a matter of convenience and physical appetite.

Within the church, the same spirit of antinomianism has prevailed too often. Pope Benedict XVI faces the
embarrassing legacy of his predecessors as he tries to explain to the world why a majority of his American adherents tell the pollsters they practice artificial means of birth control when a papal encyclical explicitly forbids such methods. One must ask how people can confess their belief in an “infallible” leader of their church and at the same time obstinately refuse to submit to that leader.

Within the Protestant churches, individuals frequently become irate when called to moral accountability. They often declare that the church has no right to intrude into their private lives. They say this in spite of the fact that in their membership vows, they publicly committed themselves to submit to the moral oversight of the church.

Antinomianism should be more rare in the evangelical Christian community than anywhere else. Sadly, the facts do not fit the theory. So blasé is the typical “evangelical” toward the law of God that the prophecies of doom that Rome thundered at Martin Luther are beginning to come true. Some “evangelicals” are indeed using justification by faith alone as a license to sin; these can be deemed properly only as pseudo-evangelicals. Anyone who has the most rudimentary understanding of justification by faith knows that authentic faith always manifests itself in a zeal for obedience. No earnest Christian can ever have a cavalier
attitude toward the law of God. Though obedience to such laws does not bring justification, the justified person will surely endeavor to obey them.

To be sure, there are times when the commandments of men are on a collision course with the laws of God. In those instances, Christians not only may disobey men, but must disobey men. I am not talking here of isolated moral issues but of attitudes. Christians must be particularly careful in this era of antinomianism not to get caught up in the spirit of the age. We are not free to do what is right in our own eyes. We are called to do what is right in His eyes.

Freedom should not be confused with autonomy. As long as evil exists in the world, the moral restraint of law is necessary. It is an act of grace by which God institutes government, which exists to restrain the evildoer. It exists to protect the innocent and the righteous. The righteous are called to support it as much as they possibly can without compromising their obedience to God.

God’s Will of Disposition

While we understand that the decretive will and the preceptive will of God are part of His overall will, other aspects of the mystery of His sovereignty remain. One such aspect is
“the will of disposition.” It is tied up with the ability of man to disobey God’s preceptive will.

This aspect of the will of God refers to what is pleasing and agreeable to God. It expresses something of the attitude of God to His creatures. Some things are “well pleasing in his sight,” while other things are said to grieve Him. He may allow (but not via moral permission) wicked things to transpire, but He is by no means pleased by them.

To illustrate how these differing aspects of the will of God come into play in biblical interpretation, let us examine the verse that says the Lord is “not willing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9, KJV). Which of the above-mentioned meanings of will fits this text? How is the meaning of the text changed by the application of the nuances?

Try first the decretive will. The verse would then mean, “God is not willing in a sovereign decretive sense that any should perish.” The implication would then be that nobody perishes. This verse would be a proof text for universalism, with its view that hell is utterly vacant of people.

The second option is that God is not willing in a preceptive way that any should perish. This would mean that God does not allow people to perish in the sense that He grants His moral permission. This obviously does not fit the context of the passage.
The third option makes sense. God is not willing in the sense that He is not inwardly disposed to, or delighted by, people’s perishing. Elsewhere, Scripture teaches that God takes no delight in the death of the wicked. He may decree what He does not enjoy; that is, He may distribute justice to wicked offenders. He is pleased when justice is maintained and righteousness is honored, even though He takes no personal pleasure in the application of such punishment.

A human analogy may be seen in our law courts. A judge, in the interest of justice, may sentence a criminal to prison and at the same time inwardly grieve for the guilty man. His disposition may be for the man but against the crime.

However, God is not merely a human judge, working under the constraints of the criminal justice system. God is sovereign—He can do what He pleases. If He is not pleased or willing that any should perish, why then does He not exercise His decretive will accordingly? How can there be a hiatus between God’s decretive will and His will of disposition?

All things being equal, God does desire that no one should perish. But all things are not equal. Sin is real. Sin violates God’s holiness and righteousness. God also is not willing that sin should go unpunished. He desires as well that His holiness should be vindicated. It is dangerous to
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speak of a conflict of interests or of a clash of desires within God. Yet, in a certain sense, we must. He wills the obedience of His creatures. He wills the well-being of His creatures. There is a symmetry of relationship ultimately between obedience and well-being. The obedient child will never perish. Those who obey God’s preceptive will enjoy the benefits of His will of disposition. When the preceptive will is violated, things are no longer equal. Now God requires punishment while not particularly enjoying the application of it.

Yet does this not beg the ultimate question? Where does the decretive will fit in? Could not God originally have decreed that no one ever would be able to sin, thus ensuring an eternal harmony among all elements of His will: decretive, preceptive, and dispositional?

Often the answer to this question is superficial. Appeals are made to the free will of man, as if by magic man’s free will could explain the dilemma. We are told that the only way God could have created a universe guaranteed to be free from sin would have been to make creatures without free will. It is then argued that these creatures would have been nothing more than puppets and would have lacked humanity, being devoid of the power or ability to sin. If that is the case, then what does it suggest about the state of our existence in heaven? We are promised that when our
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redemption is complete, sin will be no more. We will still have an ability to choose, but our disposition will be so inclined toward righteousness that we will, in fact, never choose evil. If this will be possible in heaven after redemption, why could it not have been possible before the fall?

The Bible gives no clear answer to this thorny question. We are told that God created people who, for better or for worse, have the ability to sin. We also know from Scripture that there is no shadow of turning in the character of God, and that all of His works are clothed in righteousness. That He chose to create man the way He did is mysterious, but we must assume, given the knowledge we have, that God’s plan was good. Any conflict that arises between His commandments to us, His desire that we should obey Him, and our failure to comply does not destroy His sovereignty.

God’s Secret and Revealed Will

We have already distinguished among the three types of the will of God: His decretive will, His preceptive will, and His will of disposition. Another distinction must be established between what is called God’s secret, or hidden, will and His revealed will. This secret will of God is subsumed under the decretive will because, for the most part,
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it remains undisclosed to us. There is a limit to the revelation God has made of Himself. We know certain things about God’s decreitive will that He has been pleased to set forth for our information in Holy Scripture. But because we are finite creatures, we do not comprehend the total dimension of divine knowledge or the divine plan. As the Scriptures teach, the secret things belong to the Lord, but that which He has revealed belongs to us and to our children forever (Deut. 29:29).

Protestant theologians have made use of the distinction between the hidden God (Deus obsconditus) and the revealed God (Deus revelatus). This distinction is valuable and indeed necessary when we realize that not all that can be known of God has been revealed to us. There is a sense in which God remains hidden from us, insofar as He has not been pleased to reveal all there is to know about Him. However, this distinction is fraught with peril since some have found within it a conflict between two kinds of gods. A god who reveals his character to be one thing, but who is secretly contrary to that revealed character, would be a supreme hypocrite.

If we say that God has no secret will and proposes to do only what He commands and nothing more, then we would perceive God as one whose desires and plans are constantly
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thwarted by the harassment of human beings. Such a god would be impotent, and no god at all.

If we distinguish between the secret aspect of God and the revealed aspect of God, we must hold these as parts of the whole, not as contradictions. That is to say, what God has revealed about Himself is trustworthy. Our knowledge is partial, but it is true as far as it goes. What belongs to the secret counsel of God does not contradict the character of God that has been revealed to us.

The distinction of God’s revealed will and hidden will raises a practical problem: the question of whether or not it is possible for a Christian to act in harmony with God’s decretive (hidden) will and at the same time work against His preceptive will.

We must admit that such a possibility exists—in a sense. For example, it was in God’s decretive will and by His determinate counsel that Jesus Christ was condemned to die on the cross. The divine purpose, of course, was to secure the redemption of God’s people. However, that purpose was hidden from the view of men who sat in judgment over Jesus. When Pontius Pilate delivered Jesus to be crucified, Pilate acted against the preceptive will of God but in harmony with the decretive will of God. Does this make nonsense of God’s preceptive will? God forbid. What it
does is bear witness to the transcendent power of God to work His purposes sovereignly in spite of, and by means of, the evil acts of men.

Consider the story of Joseph, whose brothers, out of jealousy and greed, sold their innocent brother into slavery in Egypt. At their reunion years later, and upon the brothers’ confession of sin, Joseph replied, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). Here is the inscrutable majesty of God’s providence. God made use of human evil in bringing to pass His purposes for Joseph and for the Jewish nation. Joseph’s brothers were guilty of willful and malicious sin. By directly violating the preceptive will of God, they sinned against their brother and against God. Yet in their sin, God’s secret counsel was brought to pass, and God brought redemption through it.

What if Joseph’s brothers had been obedient? Joseph would not have been sold into slavery; he would not have been taken to Egypt; he would not have been sent to prison, from which he was called to interpret a dream. What if Joseph had not become prime minister? What would have become the historical reason for the brothers’ settling in Egypt? There would have been no Jewish settlement in Egypt, no Moses, no exodus from Egypt, no law, no prophets, no Christ, no salvation.
Can we, therefore, conclude that the sins of Joseph’s brothers were, in fact, virtues in disguise? Not at all. Their sin was sin, a clear violation of the preceptive will of God, for which they were held responsible and judged to be guilty. But God brought good out of evil. This reflects neither a contradiction in God’s character nor a contradiction between His precepts and His decrees. Rather it calls attention to the transcendent power of His sovereignty.

Is it possible for us in this day and age to obey the preceptive will of God and yet be in conflict with the secret will of God? Of course this is possible. It may be the will of God, for example, that He use a foreign nation to chastise the United States for sinning against God. It may be in the plan of God to have the people of the United States brought under judgment through the aggressive invasion of Russia. In terms of God’s inscrutable will, He could be, for purposes of judgment, “on the side of the Russians.” Yet at the same time, it would remain the duty of the civil magistrate of the American nation to resist the transgression of our borders by a conquering nation.

We have a parallel in the history of Israel, where God used the Babylonians as a rod to chastise His people Israel. In that situation, it would have been perfectly proper for the civil magistrate of Israel to have resisted the wicked invasion
of the Babylonians. In so doing, the Israelites would have been, in effect, resisting the decretive will of God. The book of Habakkuk wrestles with the severe problem of God’s use of the evil inclinations of men to bring judgment on His people. This is not to suggest that God favored the Babylonians. He made it clear that judgment would fall on them also, but He first made use of their evil inclinations in order to bring a corrective discipline to His own people.

**Knowing the Will of God for Our Lives**

Pursuing knowledge of the will of God is not an abstract science designed to titillate the intellect or to convey the kind of knowledge that “puffs up” but fails to edify. An understanding of the will of God is desperately important for every Christian seeking to live a life that is pleasing to his or her Creator. It is a very practical thing for us to know what God wants for our lives. A Christian asks: “What are my marching orders? What should my role be in contributing to the establishment of the kingdom of God? What does God want me to do with my life?” It is inconceivable that a Christian could live for very long without coming face-to-face with these gripping questions.

Having been a Christian for some fifty years, with the
study of theology my main vocational pursuit, I find the practical question of the will of God pressing on my mind quite frequently. I doubt a fortnight passes that I am not seriously engaged by the question of whether I am doing what God wants me to do at this point in my life. The question haunts and beckons all of us. It demands resolution, and so we must ask ourselves, “How do we know the will of God for our lives?”

The practical question of how we know the will of God for our lives cannot be solved with any degree of accuracy unless we have some prior understanding of the will of God in general. Without the distinctions that we have made, our pursuit of the will of God can plunge us into hopeless confusion and consternation. When we seek the will of God, we must first ask ourselves which will we are seeking to discover.

If our quest is to penetrate the hidden aspects of His will, then we have embarked on a fool’s errand. We are trying the impossible and chasing the untouchable. Such a quest is not only an act of foolishness, but also an act of presumption. There is a very real sense in which the secret will of the secret counsel of God is none of our business and is off limits to our speculative investigations.

Untold evils have been perpetrated on God’s people by
unscrupulous theologians who have sought to correct or to supplant the clear and plain teaching of sacred Scripture by doctrines and theories based on speculation alone. The business of searching out the mind of God where God has remained silent is dangerous business indeed. Luther put it this way: “We must keep in view his word and leave alone his inscrutable will; for it is by his word and not by his inscrutable will that we must be guided.”

Christians are permitted, in a sense, to attempt to discern the will of God by means of illumination by the Holy Spirit and by confirmation through circumstances that we are doing the right thing. However, as we will discover, the search for providential guidance must always be subordinate to our study of the revealed will of God. In our search, we must also come to terms with the dynamic tensions created by the concept of man’s will *versus* predestination. Before our inquiry can lead us into such practical avenues as occupation and marriage, we must face the thorny issues involved in the free will/predestination issue. We have seen what the will of God entails. What about the will of man? How do the two relate? How free is man, after all?